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### The Greek System Stories: Fact and Fiction

Fraternities and sororities at a university are known as the Greek System. While thousands of students participate in the Greek System in university campuses across the country, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has the largest. One of the reasons for this large Greek System is the sheer size of the University of Illinois campus. When the University suggests that incoming students join a group or organization as a way to make the campus “feel smaller,” a sorority or a fraternity is a logical option. Immediately some students reject the idea of participating in the Greek System. However, other students take time to explore the opportunities available. As a result, a significant percentage of students participate in the Greek System. Many of these students remain in the system until graduation, while others drop out of the Greek System before graduation. Regardless, the Greek System plays a significant role in university life for many students. Therefore, when University of Illinois students are interviewed concerning Greek life, a variety of interesting stories some factual, some fictional are revealed.

Before actually arriving on campus, many incoming freshmen are already familiar with the Greek System through media exposure. For example, before the Class of 2007 entered the University of Illinois, MTV aired a reality television series called “Sorority Life” based on actual events at fraternities and sororities. A current senior in the University of Illinois Class of 2007 recalls that she watched the series and believed it played into the stereotypes that surround sorority girls. For instance, when sorority members decided which girls would be invited to pledge their house, attractiveness was a big factor. In addition, many of the shows revolved around drinking and partying. Academics were rarely mentioned. Other University of Illinois

women also suggested that, in general, MTV portrayed sorority girls as “stupid, vain and overly obsessed with appearance.” Although MTV brushed sororities with a broad disapproving stroke, this negative exposure did not deter these women from not only checking out but actually participating in the University of Illinois Greek System.

Many incoming students also learn about fraternities and sororities through family members. When these students arrive on campus, they are considered legacies. This means that a relative is an alumnus of a particular fraternity or sorority. Legacy students indicated that they felt pressured not only to be involved in the Greek System but also to join the exact house their relative had joined.

Each fall semester, fraternities and sororities begin the recruitment process. This is the time that each house tries to attract new members. In order to make their house appear unique, each fraternity and sorority house focuses on a particular theme that showcases their house in a positive light. For example, sororities will create recruitment themes to help recruits distinguish their house from the others on campus. For fall 2007, themes ranged from Tiffany & Co. to Sweet Home Alabama. On the other hand, fraternities usually focus on sporting events inviting recruits to watch a Cubs game and eat chicken wings.

During the recruitment process, existing sorority members will share stories with recruits concerning events that have occurred at their house. Most of the stories concern philanthropies and themed social events. Recruits can learn a lot about house by listening to these stories. For example, during her recruitment one student remembers being told a story about a Luau Exchange between a sorority and a fraternity. The interesting part of the story was that several members of the sorority dressed as volcanoes to attend the event. Another student heard a story from a sorority girl about how the girl attended a party, drank too much, and woke up in a

cornfield with no shoes and no ride back to the sorority house. Actually, the student was happy to hear the story because she immediately eliminated this house from her list of possibilities. In general, students were interested in hearing stories about costume parties, charity fund raisers and formal dances. Students who pledged sororities frequently reported doing so as a result of the stories shared at these recruitment events.

Stories are also passed down when a student is pledging a fraternity or sorority. These stories usually contain information unique to a particular house. For example, the story reveals who founded the house, when it was founded, and why it was founded. Fraternity and sorority members also discover the principles upon which their house was founded. Recruits are tested on the material. Some houses test each week, while others wait until the end of the pledge period. In addition, certain houses use their founding data as part of their weekly meeting ritual. For example, members may chant founding data at each meeting. Of those Greek students interviewed, all indicated that it is important to know the historical background of your house.

When a student is formally inducted into his or her respective house, it is called initiation. On initiation day secret stories are passed down to the pledges. At this time, they learn the true meaning of the Greek letters that make up the name of the fraternity or sorority. In addition, pledges are taught secret handshakes, secret knocks and secret songs. Fraternities have a secret room where the ceremony takes place and only members of the house ever see the room. Students interviewed would not share any of their house secrets. According to these students, their knowledge of their house stories is what makes them different from any other organization on campus. These students indicated it is powerful to know information that only you and other members (alumni and collegiate) know about your house. It is a secret and powerful bond. In

fact, many students interviewed indicated that being inducted into their house and learning the secret stories of their house bonds members for life.

Since initiation and pledging are highly secretive, it is not surprising that there are many stories circulating about what exactly occurs at each house. Interestingly, students interviewed would not share any secrets concerning their own house but were eager to share gossip about other houses. Many of these stories revolved around the week before Initiation day called “Hell Week.” For example, one fraternity storyteller indicated that he had heard that a fraternity member attached pledges to leashes and tied the leashes to a tree outside of a bar. The fraternity member then offered the pledges beer in dog bowls. Another rumor circulating indicates that a certain fraternity house forces its pledges to raise a puppy and then kill the puppy at the end of the six month pledge trial. Other gossip includes the fraternity house that forces its pledges to do a line of cocaine to show their allegiance to the fraternity. Another fraternity house forces its pledges to remain in a room for 48 hours while listening to the same annoying song playing over and over. Since none of the storytellers were actual eyewitnesses to any of these events, the validity of these stories is highly questionable.

There are also stories circulating about sorority initiations. For example, one sorority house is rumored to make its pledges strip down to their bras and panties while members circle the fat or ugly parts of each pledge’s body. Other sorority gossip has several sorority houses with scales at their front doors to insure that pledges do not gain the infamous freshmen fifteen. Another big tale has a certain sorority house forcing its pledges to sit in a coffin with a dead owl and then getting out and being reborn as a sorority member.

All of these far-fetched fraternity and sorority stories were told in the past tense. The University of Illinois strictly forbids hazing. Therefore, many students are reluctant to share

stories that will be harmful to the entire Greek System. In addition, these stories are not based on any factual evidence. They are considered fictional. Members will not share the secrets of their house membership. Therefore, no one inside or outside of the Greek System knows exactly what occurs in any house other than their own. And, they are not talking at all about their own houses.

There are also stories about the social standing of each house. For instance, gossip indicates that there are three kings and three queens that are at the top of the Greek hierarchy and are known as the Greek gods. Apparently, fraternity and sorority members of these houses get free passes with free drinks for any bar in town. Nasty slogans also are associated with various houses. For example, if the University of Illinois had a Tri Alpha house, the slogan might be “Try Alpha, Everyone Else Has” indicating the members had questionable morals. Rivalries are also rumored to exist within the Greek System. For example, one house might absolutely hate another house. Frequently, it is the house next door. Occasionally, the houses work out their aggressiveness through a friendly annual football game. However, sometimes one house steals something meaningful from another house. For example, one fraternity house tried to steal something from a rival fraternity but it is rumored that the thief was caught and beaten. Interestingly, those students outside of the Greek System often tell the biggest tales. For example, one student recalled hearing that “joining a fraternity or sorority was like paying for friends.” This student thought people who participate in the Greek System are “rich snobs.” Students outside of the Greek System are known as GDIs meaning “god damn independents” with their own mock Greek name, Gamma Delta Iota.

Regardless of the stories circulating about the Greek System, each year new students continue to join fraternities and sororities at the University of Illinois. Many Greek alumni

continue to support the university's Greek System. Fact or fiction the stories circulating concerning the Greek System are fascinating.